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Web Site Provides
N.M. Health InfoLab Team Built
Service for FreeBY IAN HOFFMAN
Journal Staff Writer

New Mexico health care hit the infobahn Thursday.

State lawmakers got a glimpse of a new Web site, HealthLink New Mexico, just hours after the health database went online at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Now anyone on the Internet can tap into www.healthlinknm.org and find the nearest New Mexico hospital. Or pick up the latest Medicaid rules. Or comparison shop for a managed-care plan.

Or discover, for example, that New Mexico diabetes patients requiring amputations jumped 12 percent in 1996.

Creators billed the searchable database as a "one-stop shop" for New Mexico health information.

"So often we hear about New Mexico being last in the nation," said Dr. Katherine Ganz, director of the New Mexico Health Policy Commission. "To my knowledge, we are the first state to pull all of this together and make it accessible."

A Los Alamos lab team led by Jim McDonald created HealthLink New Mexico over two years and did it for free. The work involved more than 20 people and would have cost, by lab estimates, about \$250,000. They designed HealthLink to be widely used, its fanciest software tucked behind a low-tech interface.

"This makes it easier for New Mexicans to find health information in the state," said McDonald of LANL's Advanced Database and Information Technology Group. "It should be easy to use, easy to update and easy to maintain."

HealthLink still is very much in its infancy. It features hospital discharge statistics for every county. Still absent, however, is New Mexico's most comprehensive health picture, the state vital statistics — a massive database that is still not "Net-ready."

"Right now, we have a lot of data and information, but we don't have it configured in a form that is readily accessible," state Health Secretary Alex Valdez told lawmakers. "We at the (state) agencies have to be sure our houses are in order and our data clean."

Soon to come: a full geographic database of health-care providers in the state, including nursing homes and small clinics. Meanwhile, public and private health-care entities can register with HealthLink to add their own Web addresses.

The Web site's search engine, LANL's own Explorer, supports all Boolean terms — the AND, OR, NOT, etc., used in complex searches — and performs full-text searches. One advanced feature, termed Alert, will e-mail users any time new information arrives on their registered subjects of personal interest.

"We got the state to the most basic stuff. After this, it will be up to the state to populate it," LANL's McDonald said.

State legislators created the

Health Information Alliance, a public-private partnership, in 1994 to mesh dozens of health-care information sources into a single, easily accessible database.

HealthLink, the first step, cost the state nearly \$400,000 in planning, hardware and licensing.

The state-owned Internet server eventually will be moved to a state or public-private network, such as New Mexico Technet or the General Service Department.

Creators of HealthLink are looking down the information highway to new and far-reaching uses: Rural clinics could consult by secure e-mail with teaching hospitals. (New Mexico is applying for a two-year, \$400,000 federal grant to accomplish this.)

Patients might download their own medical records or forward them to a new doctor, all totally encrypted and confidential.

Physicians could cut their overhead by filing a single, standardized bill for all health insurers. Pieces of the same document, minus patient names, would be automatically routed to the Health Department and Health Policy Commission for routine reporting of a disease or a newborn.

These leaps will take money, time and policy decisions on such issues as levels of confidentiality and data standards for state government.

"The question is, are they priorities of the state of New Mexico and the Legislature?" said the Health Policy Commission's Ganz.